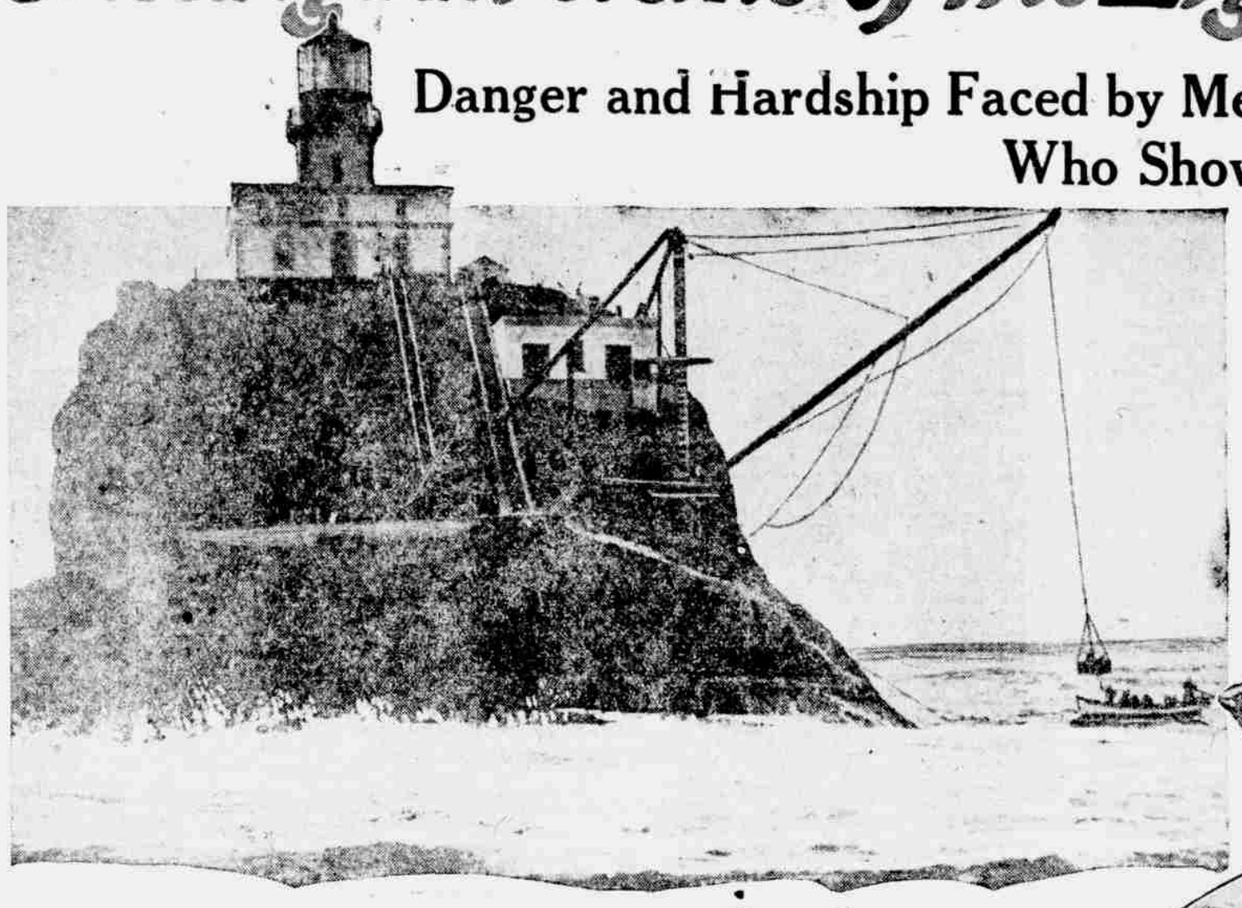
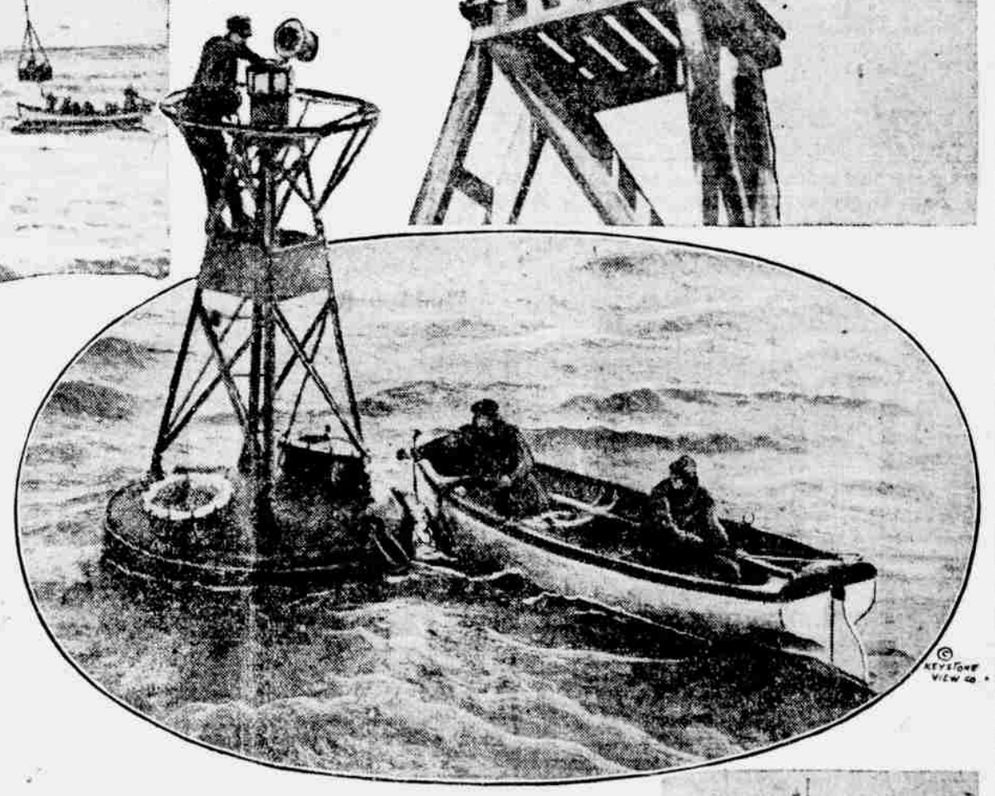
Unsung Heroisms Of the Lighthouse Keepers

Danger and Hardship Faced by Men and Women Who Show the Way to Safety Over the Storm-Swept Sea



Landing a relief crew at Tillamock lighthouse off the mouth of the Columbia River in Oregon. When the sea is high the rock on which the lighthouse stands is quite inaccessible and the five men on duty there are often prisoners for months at a time

On the right, Elizabeth Greene, keeper of America's smallest lighthouse, at the entrance to Kinse Cove on the coast of Maine



THE wireless, improved compasses, depth finders and other modern triumphs of science and inventions have greatly lessened the difficulties of ocean navigation. But nothing yet devised has been able to remove the necessity of marking the reefs, shoals and rocky headlands along every much frequented coast with lighthouses to guide approaching ships.

So the lighthouse service continues to be one of the most important branches of the government's activities. With unflagging vigilance its faithful little army of nearly 1,500 men and women, scattered along our lengthy coast line, burn the powerful lights and sound the fog horns and deep throated bells that mean so much to the sensitive ears and eyes of the navigator.

No other servants of the government render a more useful service to the nation and the world. And yet surprisingly little is known about these men and women—of the lonely lives they lead in their sea swept homes, of the privations and hardships they endure and the dangers they frequently face.

Like all people whose lives are intimately connected with the sea the lighthouse keepers are reticent folk, reluctant to talk of their deeds. Even when they have done something remarkable in the way of heroism, endurance and loyalty to duty they seldom get into print. They are the nation's unsung heroes and heroines.

To get even a faint idea of their sturdy courage and self-sacrificing devotion to duty we must go to the records of the lighthouse service in Washington where some of their achievements—though by no means all—are described in the most prosaic language.

Since the days of President Jefferson the annals of the lighthouse service have been filled with simple, matter of fact accounts of service rendered under the most trying conditions. There is the account of Ebenezer Skiff, keeper of the Gayhead lighthouse who wrote that "clay and ochre of different colors ascend in a sheet of wind opened by the high cliffs and catch on the lighthouse glass, which often requires cleaning on the outside—tedious service in cold weather. The spring of water in the edge of the cliff is not sufficient. I have carted almost the whole of the water used in my family during the last summer and until this month commenced from nearly a mile distant."

The Senate of the United States discussed the matter and in legislative enactment stated that "the service of the lightkeeper is one of great isolation for themselves and for their families, and in many instances of a most hazardous character. It calls for the highest degree of faithfulness and attention, not only involves the giving of warnings by lights and other aids to navigations, but oftentimes involves the saving of lives and wrecks of ships."

But the Senate underestimated, as it frequently does. It stated the case too mildly. The voluntary hardships and risks taken by these quiet heroes number from 150 to 200 a year. They are recorded in the matter of fact reports received at Washington. That in most cases is the final word. But these reports make a national glory book of heroic deed. Glance at a few of them buried often in yellowed, mildewed pages.

From the keeper of the post lights on St. Johns River in Florida came this:

"Arrived at the light at 9.30 in the morning. Took the lamp out and as I went to blow it out it exploded, knocking me off the light twenty-two feet to the ground below. I did not know anything until about noon. When I came to I crawled back to my boat which was 250 feet away, got another lamp, put it on the beacon and lit it. Then I came home, a distance of eight miles. Injury, broken leg, just above the ankle, and severe bruised shin and bruised arm and lick on the head."

There is the keeper of the Pilot Island lighthouse on the Great Lakes who one, wild, stormy night saw through the gloom that two schooners had been driven on the island. Making sure that his light was burning, he picked his way through the surf and along a ledge of rock. The wind was of furious velocity and a misstep on the slippery stone meant broken bones, if not death. But he followed the ledge until he came to the wrecks.

Standing on the last ledge of rock upon which he could maintain his footing, he shouted at the top of his voice until at last he attracted the attention of the men who were clinging to the fast disintegrating vessels. He ordered them to jump.

They jumped into the frothy, boiling water. As they leaped the keeper would plunge in to seize them as they came to the surface. He guided them on to the ledge. There were a woman and an old man and these he carried ashore in his arms making two trips while the heavy sea pounded at his feet.

The glory book of heroic deeds in Washington archives includes the women keepers of the light. There are quite a few of them and they are equal in every way in courage, fortitude and stamina to the men. They too carry on regardless.

The largest lens ever made for the United States lighthouse service

On bleak, dreary, misnamed Angel Island in San Francisco Bay looking out through the Golden Gate there is a lighthouse. It is a very important beacon, particularly when the heavy cold fogs sweep in from the gray Pacific or the thick, soupy tulle fogs come down from the great inland rivers.

The keeper of this light is a woman. She reported in the usual matter of fact way that because the mechanism failed to work "she had struck the bell by hand for twenty hours and thirty-five minutes, until the fog lifted."

And as if one such experience was not enough of a contribution to the deeds of glorious service she tells of how the fog warning signal machinery again became disabled just as a fog swept in and enveloped the steamer lanes. So she stood all night on the cold, foggy outside platform striking the bell with a hammer. The report states that she did it "with all her might, for the fog was dense."

Another woman, keeper of the New Canal light on Lake Ponchartrain, stuck to her post the night of the great hurricane which passed through New Orleans, on September 28, 1915. She was alone at the station and kept the light burning by fastening a lens and hanging a lantern in the tower while the cyclonic winds wreaked terrific damage all about her.

There are no special bursts of loyal service. These deeds are not performed to martial airs or under the stimulus of comrades, cheering sidelines or war's propaganda. They are done when every impulse of a human being is to seek safety and when without doubt the suggestion becomes insistent that there is no need of service and no one would ever know if it were not given.

Yet these keepers are constant in season and out of season. The tradition of constancy is ever with them. There was the keeper of the Key West light who after thirty-five years of service became so absorbed in his duty that he would not leave fearing that something might go wrong.

On one very stormy night a ship was wrecked near the fort at Key West. The keeper, then nearly seventy years of age, excited by the storm and the prolonged whistle blasts of the unfortunate vessel, insisted that the front range light was out. He feared this had caused the wreck.

His son could not quiet him and at the height of the gale he made his feeble way with his lantern to the top to satisfy himself that it was still burning. It was. But the exposure was too much and he died shortly afterward.

Not all lightkeepers are in the houses, some of them are on lightships that float the waves. Here, too, are other chapters to this glory book.

At the time of the German submarine rampage when the U-53 visited Newport, later sinking a number of ships, the Nantucket Shoals lightship, forty miles off Nantucket Island, did faithful service picking up the shipwrecked until there were 115 men and nineteen boats aboard. Had it not been for this ship the most of these sailors would have lost their lives, according to Captain David B. Studley, the master.

Minot's Ledge lighthouse on the Massachusetts coast which rises into the air right out of the very sea

After we became a party to the European turmoil the lightships bore their share of the burden. But what did these keepers care for mere war? They had often warred with the elements and won. Bring on your war!

The war came to the Diamont Shoals lightship at 2.30 o'clock on the morning of August 6, 1918, when a submarine calmly began firing from about a mile and a half away. The lightship at its own peril sent a wireless warning to all other ships in the vicinity. The baffled submarine fired six shots and stopped to give chase to a merchant ship, knowing that the lightship was easy prey at any time.

When the sub came back she peppered seven more shots at the defenseless boat. The lightship's crew managed to get away in their boats watching the ocean go beneath the waves. Rowing long and hard they finally reached Cape Hatteras lighthouse at 9.30 at night.

Like the San Francisco woman who carried on when machinery failed the crew of the lighthouse tender Kukui wrote her name on the hero roles. The Annie E., a sixty-ton schooner from Honolulu to Hawaii with a cargo of lumber and gasoline, sprang several leaks on August 8, 1920. Two sailors left the ship hoping to make shore and pick up assistance. These were in turn picked up by a fishing sampan. Motor boats and navy hydroplanes and airplanes searched in vain for the leaking ship.

Seven days later, guided by a wireless report from the United States transport Madawaska, the lighthouse tender Kukui, which was having its boilers repaired, fixed up a temporary patch, got up steam and renewed the search. The next evening it located the disabled schooner 225 miles from Honolulu and rescued all of the crew. In such bad shape was the schooner because of its drifting that it was necessary to set it afire to prevent it from becoming a derelict menace to navigation.

This rescue was made by the Kukui when she herself was not in the best of shape. Mainly it was made because from its captain to cook the men were determined to rescue the craft regardless of all the dangers.

In August, 1893, Martins Industry lightship was driven from its station in a hurricane. The ship lost all its boats and the master had three ribs broken.

Lighting the gas buoy which supplements .he work of the lighthouses near Pollock Rip Slue on the coast of Massachusetts—a perilous undertaking in stormy weather

The vessel dragged until nearly in the breakers.

Did the crew and officers make for shore? They did not. The mate by consummate seamanship worked the craft back to its regular position, using sail power alone.

The Nantucket lightship seen by nearly every traveler going to and from Europe, guards one of the most dangerous parts of the national coast line. It goes where no other vessel is allowed to go, and through storm, sunshine, darkness and fog gives warning, aid and direction. Its daily work of hazard is unadvertised.

The tender Columbine in the Hawaiian Islands, rescued, so the drab records read, "a British bark four times her size after fifty-six hours of continuous work." Sailors familiar with the extraordinary situation that confronted the Columbine says that "nothing short of valor, heroism and determination" made the deed possible.

Such service gets to be a habit with those whose names are enrolled in this Glory Book. They live for it and die for it. One lightkeeper on the Columbia River, Oregon, only took two days' leave in twenty-three years and that for the purpose of getting married.